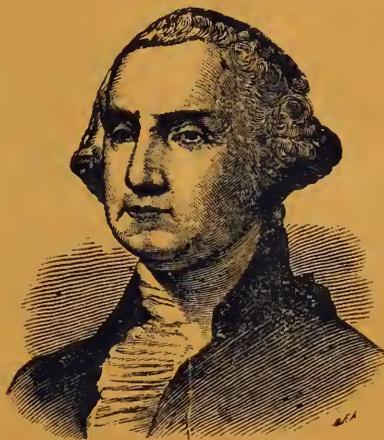


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A Little Story
of Washington's Crossing



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of Washington's Crossing

BY

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A Little Story of Washington's Crossing



GENERAL WASHINGTON'S month-long "Retreat through the Jerseys," by the end of November, 1776, had become an accomplished fact. Its progress was marked by the waning fortunes of the Revolutionary cause, due to lack of men, money and genuinely popular support, not to mention the inherent weakness of a spineless form of government vested in the Continental Congress. All this blackened the national sky, whose horizon still glowed with hope inspired by the recently signed Declaration of Independence.

Small wonder is it that in Trenton, while General Washington's depleted and half-equipped forces

were crossing from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, "Tom" Paine, writing in the *Crisis*, said :

“ These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country, but he that stands by it now deserves the thanks of man and woman.”

The Days Before the Crossing

WHEN, during the first week in December, General Washington, with his Continental and State troops, hovered and clustered along the west bank of the Delaware river, it was found that he had about six thousand effective men under his command.

Establishing himself in the recently built Barclay residence, situated on the brow of the hill overlooking what is now the borough of Morrisville, Pennsylvania, the Commander-in-Chief upon the 14th of December took up his headquarters in the farmhouse of William Keith, between Washington's Crossing and Newtown. Here he learned of the capture of General Lee, of the hasty adjournment of Congress from Philadelphia to Baltimore, and of the growth of Tory spirit in the Quaker City, under the leadership of Galloway. It was then that General Washington wrote :

“No man, I believe, ever had a greater choice of difficulties and less means to extricate himself from them.”

Hastily, General Washington arranged his army into three corps. The troops were scattered from New Hope, opposite Lambertville, then Coryell's Ferry, to Bristol.

One corps was stationed at Bristol, under Colonel John Cadwalader. Another was at Morrisville, known as Trenton, Colvin's or Continental Ferry, under Brigadier-General James Ewing. Four Brigades, under Generals Sterling, Mercer (who was so soon to die upon the field at Princeton and for whom Mercer county is named), Stephen and DeFemoy held the upper fords between New Hope and Yardley.

Trenton was then a market and post town of about eight hundred people. Following one hundred years of permanent settlement, it occupied in its built-up portion a triangle, the apex of which is the Battle Monument, one side Montgomery street, the other Warren, then King street, and the base the Assunpink creek, which separated Hunterdon and Burlington counties.

In this village, immediately after Washington had crossed the river and was preparing for the descent upon the King's troops, was located a Hessian force of about fourteen hun-

dred men. There were three regiments—those of Rall, von Kuyphausen and von Lossberg, a small artillery detachment, fifty Yagers and a few dragoons. Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rall was in command. Practically unprotected outposts of his force extended from Pennington on the north to Mount Holly on the south. The latter was in command of Count Dunop, subsequently slain in the affair at Red Bank, and who, like Rall, has no monument to mark an unknown resting place.

General Washington's Plans

IT WAS in the Morrisville headquarters and in the headquarters that he shortly after established near Newtown, that General Washington planned the battle of Trenton. Primarily his purpose was a triune movement. It was determined that Colonel Cadwalader should cross the Delaware from Bristol to Burlington and beat up the Hessian posts at Mount Holly and Bordentown. General Ewing was to go over from Morrisville and locate south of the Assunpink creek to cut off the possible escape of Rall's Hessians should they attempt to join the posts in Burlington county, while General Washington with some twenty-five hundred men and eighteen pieces of artillery was to cross the river at McKonkey's Ferry, nine miles above Trenton, and make the direct descent upon the garrison town.

These plans were based upon this assumption: Inasmuch as the main body of the Anglo-Hessian force in New Jersey, under General Grant, was centered in New Brunswick and

its vicinity, thirty miles from Trenton, Colonel Rall and his outposts could easily be subdued by a sudden attack. Added to this an overabundance of Christmas cheer would sap, for the nonce, the military vigor of the untrained young peasants who had been shipped like cattle at the behest of the petty princes over-sea.

Although in dire straits, General Washington furthermore relied upon the inactivity of Generals Cornwallis and Howe, who are said to have been awaiting news from England to the effect that a great middle-class sentiment at home would influence the government toward a policy of colonial reconciliation. Beside, it was asserted that the "Old Fox," as General Washington was called, had been driven to cover and that he would be bagged in the spring, when a concerted Tory movement would be made upon Philadelphia.

What Happened at McKonkey's Ferry

AFTER spending nearly a month along the Delaware River valley and the middle portion of Bucks county, Pennsylvania, General Washington prepared for his descent upon Trenton. The spot chosen to cross the river was McKonkey's Ferry. A council of war was held, at which assembled the officers of the army, and at which a most free and outspoken discussion was had.

In spite of injunctions as to secrecy, the news of the Whig army manœuvres spread through the Bucks country-side, then largely affected, as was a goodly portion of Central New Jersey, by a pro-Tory sentiment. Sympathizers with the Crown's cause carried the news to Colonel Rall upon that Christmas day; but he, feasting and drinking in the house of the patriot Colonel Abram Hunt, situated where the Masonic Temple now stands, utterly disregarded all warnings. From early morning of Christmas day, 1776, until three o'clock upon the morning of December 26th, the

long, scow-like Durham boats, rowboats, canoes, perriaugers, in fact, all craft that had been collected by Whig agents for miles along the river, conveyed troops, horses and cannon across the stream. During Christmas night a wet snow fell, while a northeast wind chilled the bodies of the half-clad men. The Delaware was filled with floating ice, sufficiently jagged to seriously interfere with the passage of the boats, which, in the main, plied along the old lines of McKonkey's Ferry. The landing points of this ferry are marked by the Buck's County Historical Society's monument in Pennsylvania and the Society of the Cincinnati's monument in New Jersey, the ferry paralleling the present Washington's Crossing-Taylorsville bridge, being a few hundred feet north of that structure.

The crossing, immortalized in song and story, the prelude to the battle of Trenton, and thus the turning point of the American Revolution, was slowly but silently made.

It had been expected that the attack upon Trenton would occur at five o'clock, and that General Ewing and Colonel Cadwalader would be able to co-operate. The glacial con-

dition of the river precluded anything more than abortive crossing attempts upon the part of the troops in Morrisville and Bristol. Thus it was that the brunt of the affair fell upon General Washington and his two division commanders, Generals Greene and Sullivan.

Standing upon a grassy slope, on the New Jersey side, surrounded by old apple trees, is a story-and-a-half cottage, now in good repair. Of General Washington's many Revolutionary headquarters this is one of the most famous. It was in this house, now owned by a citizen of Philadelphia, that General Washington passed a portion of Christmas night and from which were issued the orders to advance upon Trenton. "The fate of an empire depends upon this night," he is said to have remarked to General Knox, and with the watchword "Victory or Death," the little band of patriots, carrying three days' cooked provisions and forty rounds of ammunition, went out into the storm-swept darkness. Defeat meant confiscation of property, expatriation, death on the gallows or by the sword. Victory meant new life for the young republic, a consummation of financial negotiations

with France, a recognition of a new government, a change from Tory to Whig sentiment; indeed, an electrical effect upon the civilized world.

Preserving the Past

SMALL wonder is it that the State of New Jersey, through various patriotic organizations and through a commission to acquire and improve the lands at McKonkey's Ferry or Washington's Crossing, has taken a deep interest in this matter of preserving as a State and National heritage the soil made sacred by this military movement supreme in Revolutionary history.

Of the rapidly passing events following the four-hour march upon Trenton everyone knows. In Trenton stands the monument practically marking the spot where the youthful Alexander Hamilton's battery opened fire upon the distracted Hessians. The Roman Catholic cathedral marks the spot where died the brave, impetuous, obstinate Colonel Rall; there are the sites of the Methodist, Protestant Episcopal and Presbyterian churches and the meeting-house of the Society of Friends, all a part of the story of Hessian occupancy and surrender. Every foot of ground in the tri-

angle of the old town, including the well-preserved barracks, built in 1758-'59, has its tale to tell.

Then, after General Washington, with his captured Hessians and their colors, returned that day to the Crossing, it was with hearts overwhelmed with gladness. No one can forget the parading of the Hessians in Philadelphia and of how General Washington, reinforced, recrossed the river to Trenton, and upon New Years day, 1777, occupied the south side of the Assunpink creek. It was by that adroit movement, when he left his camp-fires burning and escaped to Princeton, that he sought and found the seclusion of winter in the hills of Morristown.

Such were the events that led to the crossing at McKonkey's Ferry. Such was the result when the news reached London, causing Lord Germaine, Secretary of State, to write :

“All our hopes were blasted by that unhappy affair at Trenton ;”

sustaining the view expressed by General Washington when, before the battle of Trenton, he thus said :

“ However, under a full persuasion of the justice of our cause, I cannot entertain an idea that it will finally sink, tho’ it may remain for some time under a cloud.”



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